Ergonomics in RTW

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Topics

- Ergonomics and Claim Avoidance
- Ergonomics and Claim Investigation
- Ergonomics and Temporary Light Duty
- Ergonomics and Permanent Modified Duty Assignments
- Ergonomics and Reasonable Accommodation
- Ergonomics Resources

Ergonomics and Claim Avoidance

- Obviously pro-active prevention is the key to avoiding ergonomic-related injuries
- Reactive prevention is also effective!
  - Early complaints before objective findings of MSD
  - OH/ergonomic evaluation of work area → cheap fixes → ⬇ symptoms → no claim
  - Don’t make the employee file a claim before you investigate and fix the problem!

Example of Claim Avoidance

- Scenario:
  - Several employees moved into new/renovated workspace
  - New desks/computer workstations
  - After a couple weeks, “Fred” complains of neck and shoulder pain

Example of Claim Avoidance

- Possible responses and probable outcomes
  - Ignore
    - → patient sees personal MD who believes diagnosis is needed in order to bill or get corrections made to work area
    - → claim
  - Evaluate
    - → corrections
    - → improved symptoms
    - → no claim!
    - → co-workers risk addressed

Ergonomics and Claim Investigation

- Ergonomics evaluation should be part of investigation of:
  - Any acute traumatic musculoskeletal injuries related to lifting or materials handling
    - Backs
    - Shoulders
    - Knee strains
  - Cumulative trauma type of complaints

Ergonomics and Ca-2 Claim Investigation

- Investigate tasks and movements, postures, reach, weights, etc. AND
- Amount of time employee spends doing them
- Number of months/years employee has spent doing them
- Are others doing same job having problems?

Agency Response to Claim Related to Ergonomics

- Should include:
  - Job description with physical demands
  - Length of time employee was in job
  - Ergonomics review of job, including duration, frequency, repetitions, force, positions, tools
  - Any information known about other jobs, medical history, etc. that may be relevant

Ergonomics and Temporary Light Duty

- Common Errors
  - Putting symptomatic employee back to same work without looking at and correcting problems
  - Putting recently improved employee back to same work without looking at and correcting problems
  - Putting symptomatic employee back to work in splints

Ergonomics and Temporary Light Duty

- When should Ergonomics evaluations be used?
  - Before returning employee to same work area – are modifications needed to make it safe?
  - Before returning employee to different work area
  - Considering positions that may work for an employee with restrictions
  - Evaluating and implementing accommodations suggested by treating MD

Example: Problem

- Doctor recommendations:
  - No lifting >20#
  - No twisting
  - No bending >10 x/hour
  - No constant sitting
  - Change positions frequently

Example: Solution

- Ergonomist recommendations:
  - Neutral posture
  - Engineering controls
    - Keep work in “strike zone”
    - Lift assist
    - Movement assist
    - Clear clutter
    - Sit/stand stools

Ergonomics and Permanent Modified Duty Assignments

- When employee has reached MMI but still has limitations
- Permanent restrictions have been defined
- Use ergonomics to evaluate possible positions for job offer, and determine if changes are needed to make the job fit the restrictions
- Use ergonomics evaluation to convince treating doc and OWCP to release the employee to work

Example: Problem

- Warehouse employee has permanent restrictions on right overhead reach and weight limit of 20 lbs (using both arms) following shoulder surgery with incomplete recovery

Example: Solution

- Ergonomics evaluation of warehouse revealed all work areas require full use of both arms and shoulders
- Proposed assignment to the company mailroom, where most packages weigh under ten lbs., and there are co-workers to move the packages > 20 lbs.
- Ergonomics review led to change to keep all packages >10 lbs on lower shelves
- Ergonomics review concluded that proposed job meets MD restrictions and job offer made

Ergonomics and Reasonable Accommodation

- Many medical disabilities for which employee may request reasonable accommodation have ergonomic aspects
- Job functions should be described as essential or non-essential
- Ability to do essential job functions must be considered with and without accommodation
- Ability to do non-essential job functions is irrelevant

Example: Problem

- Clerical employee is returning to work following bilateral CTS surgery related to arthritis
- Doctor advises keying for no more than 20 minutes every hour, use of split keyboard, 5 minute break each hour to rest and stretch, maintenance of neutral posture

Reasonable Accommodation Example

- What else do we need to know?
- What are her job duties?
- Which are essential?
- Which are non-essential?

Reasonable Accommodation Job Duties

- Essential:
  - Entering laboratory data into computer program, performing QA check on data, producing routine reports
- Non-essential:
  - Acting as back-up for time-keeper for her work area

Ergonomics Review

- Job is done at a terminal, shared with others on other shifts, with a pull-out keyboard tray, mouse on the desk
  - Data entry is from the night before.
  - Data entry is done for the first 3 hours every morning – constant keying.
  - Remainder of day is spent on QA checks, reports, with intermittent and non-repetitive keyboard use

Example: Solution

- Consider possible changes in way work is done:
  - Scanning
  - Dictation
- Change work order
  - Spread keying out over the course of the day to come close to MD recommendation for 20 min/hour limit
- Improve workstation ergonomics
  - Adjustable tray with room for the mouse
  - Split keyboard

Questions?

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Ergonomics Resources

- http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil/ergopgm/ergohome.htm
- http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/ergonomics/index.html
- http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/ergonomics/